The Strength to See

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In order to gain release from suffering, we first have to comprehend it. That’s a message we don’t like to hear. We’d rather get swept straight to Nirvana in waves of bliss. But it doesn’t work that way. If you’re going to get beyond suffering, you have to understand what it is, why it is. And how the mind creates suffering. This requires that we sit and look very steadily at two things we don’t like to look at—physical suffering and mental suffering. Because to look at these things requires a great deal of strength and a great deal of determination. Physical suffering, if we’re going to watch it, if we’re going to understand it, requires that we be very resilient, that we have lots of endurance. Just sit with it so that after a while we’ll come to understand it. It’s not that you’re going to gain brownie points by sitting with it for x number of hours and just putting up with it. You sit with it so you can see it, watch it, and particularly see how the mind interacts with it. As for mental suffering, most of us tend to focus on the kind of suffering that comes from when other people have mistreated us. But actually, the most difficult thing to look at is not that. It’s the suffering we cause ourselves through our own actions, when we’ve mistreated others, when we’ve mistreated ourselves. We don’t like to admit it. To see that kind of suffering requires integrity, the ability to admit your mental suffering. The ability to admit that, yes, you did that, and yes, it caused suffering. A large part of our practice is developing the strength we need to watch these things, to see these things, to admit these things to ourselves. In terms of dealing with physical suffering, it’s where concentration comes in. For most of us, our powers of concentration don’t go very far past suffering. Momentary concentration, which is ordinary, everyday concentration, tends to get stopped by suffering. Even just the slightest little bit of displeasure or boredom or dissatisfaction, and we’re gone. We’re off someplace else. To say nothing of out-and-out pain, we don’t like being there. It’s like throwing a mustard seed into a hot pan. It bounces here and bounces there. It just doesn’t want to stay right where the pan is. But when you can learn to focus on the breath, make the breath comfortable, give the mind a good place to stay that you can create at will. As you get more and more sensitive to the different levels of breathing—the in-and-out breath, the breath that flows throughout the body, the still breath—this gives you a good foundation for looking at pain because you don’t feel so threatened by it. For the most part, if you just jump down into the pain, the one thing in your mind is, “How can we put an end to this pain?” Which means that you’re not trying to comprehend it; you’re just trying to get rid of it. This is threatening. But if you can come at the pain from a sense of ease, from a sense of well-being, you’re a lot more likely to look at it and see what’s going on, to see what precisely those sensations of pain are. We have lots of preconceived notions of pain based on our memories of past pain, and you just slap those labels on any pain that comes up. You don’t have to be patient enough to really look at it and see what is the precise physical sensation of pain. Also, what is the mind doing to help create that pain by the way it labels it, by the way it comments on it, by the fears it has about what the future holds with this pain? How much longer is it going to last? How long has it already lasted? You weigh the present moment down with worries about the future. You have complaints about the past. No wonder the pain seems unbearable. But if you can learn to strip away those thoughts, strip away the label that just says, “Here’s the pain, and it’s right there, and it has this shape, and it has this quality,” just let those labels go. Let those thoughts go. What’s left of the pure sensation of pain? You learn a lot about the mind. And the things you learn about the mind are necessary for gaining awakening, to see how the mind fashions things, and how it fashions pain in a lot of unnecessary ways. It’s only when you see how unnecessary it is that you can gain release from it. That’s how you develop the strength you need to look at physical pain. For mental and emotional pain, the ability to see that depends on your integrity, seeing that you can’t blame your emotional pain on other people. There’s an awful lot that the mind is contributing to that pain. To have the strength to see that requires that you be in the right environment. If you’re in an environment where confessing your mistakes is seen as a sign of weakness, you’ll never see anything. This is why the Buddha, in his instructions to Rahula, said, “If you notice that you’ve done anything that’s caused harm, talk to somebody else about it. Talk to somebody else on the path. Don’t be embarrassed. Don’t feel ashamed to talk.” It’s only when you talk about these scenes that you can get perspective from other people. And you also don’t feel afraid to look at these things yourself. If you’re in a bad environment where confessing your mistakes is seen as a sign of weakness, you see it as a sign of weakness. And you don’t want to confess them even to yourself. This is why when the Buddha taught the Dhamma, he didn’t teach just a technique for meditation. He provided a whole context. This is why we have the monastic sangha. This is why we have the Vinaya. This is why we have the standards that he set down for the good human values, for people who want to practice, who want to put an end to suffering. When you develop these two kinds of strength, the strength of integrity and the strength of concentration, then you can see things a lot more clearly. You can comprehend the suffering. You can maintain a steady gaze that watches these events as they arise, as they stay, as they pass away, and see what actions that you’re doing are connected to whatever pain comes up, whatever suffering, mental or physical, comes up. And it’s only by developing these strengths that you can get through to where we’re all practicing for, which is the release from suffering. So these are the things we work on. We work on concentration. We work on integrity. Because they’re the strengths that enable us to see. And it’s in the seeing that we gain freedom.

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